

Taking Responsibility for Your Own Learning: Maximizing Training Opportunities

by Carmen Rivers

Has this ever happened to you? You go to a workshop, a conference or a class, read a book or watch a DVD, to help you develop professionally. What you learn is thought-provoking and you tell yourself you will give the new ideas a try. Then you return to the demands of everyday work and get pulled right back into the comfort of your familiar routines, somehow forgetting all about what you recently learned and the changes you were going to make. This is a common scenario, yet one you can avoid by taking responsibility for your own learning and being intentional before, during, and after a learning event.

McCarthy (2000) defines learning as “the realization of something new and our response to that newness” (p. 3). In order for learning to translate into change, you need to commit to changes in both your thoughts and actions. This



Carmen Rivers, MA Ed, teaches in the Early Childhood Department of the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. She has taught preschool children, directed and administered child care centers, and provided technical assistance and training related

to child care licensing, quality enhancement, and improving business practices. As an educator, Carmen believes in the conceptual framework of the UW-Whitewater: a teacher is a reflective facilitator. In her role as an educator, she hopes to help her students make connections between theory and their own experiences as they refine their own values, beliefs, and assumptions about how to teach young children.

process begins with understanding your passions. As Dirkx (2006) suggests, adult learning is as emotional as it is intellectual: “Affective issues influence why adults learn from educational programs; their interest in the subject matter, the process by which they engage the material, their experiences, the teacher and one another” (p. 15). As a learner, you are the only one who can ensure your emotional investment in your learning. We only learn what we want to learn.

Goal-Setting

Taking responsibility for your own learning begins by setting goals that are based on self-reflection and the feedback you receive from others’ observations of you. Any staff evaluation process includes both self-evaluation and observations. The discussions I had with my teaching staff when I was a director were times to share our different perspectives and set goals. Once you are aware of both your strengths and weaknesses, you can set priorities around these. You need training opportunities to help you learn what you already know and are passionate about, in addition to helping you gain new knowledge and experience in your weaker areas. Setting priorities and learning

goals based upon your strengths, weaknesses, and areas of deep interest will ensure you have a professional development plan to which you are deeply committed.

Establishing your Starting Point

Everything you have learned and experienced has shaped you: your values, beliefs, and assumptions. When working with children, we regularly check their knowledge and understanding before diving into a new theme or classroom project. Give yourself the gift of self-assessment before your next learning experience. Check your:

- **Knowledge base:** Consider what you already know about the topic: What do you know for certain?
- **Assumptions:** Based upon what you know and the experiences you have had, you may have developed some ideas that you believe to be true. Understand these going in, and be prepared to let go of them when you learn something new. It’s not unusual for me to attend a workshop or training thinking I know certain things about a topic only to learn later that they were only assumptions, and incorrect assumptions at that.

Years ago, when I started teaching young children, I believed that my job was to plan activities that were creative and fun. It took years to understand the need to be intentional in my planning and to ensure that the experiences I provided for young children were meaningful and relevant to their lives.

- **Biases:** We all want to believe that we are without bias — that we see everyone and everything objectively and individually. However, we are human. Prior experiences create bias. Try to figure out what your biases related to the learning topic are. You may not be able to eliminate your personal biases, but you can discover them and find ways to manage them.

I have facilitated several trainings related to nature-based learning and environments. Often, participants come wanting to learn but become stuck behind their fears of the outdoors (icky bugs, dirt, and other known dangers). These are the biases that their lack of experience, or negative experiences, have left behind. Before they can help children love and appreciate nature, they need to move beyond their own fears and biases. Acknowledging our biases is the first step. Actively seeking opportunities to move beyond them is the next; perhaps a camping trip is in order.

- **Objectives:** Now that you have a clear picture of what you already know, what you assume, and the biases you hold, write down what you hope to learn. Write learning objectives that are meaningful to you and that are:
 - Achievable: Do you have the tools?
 - Measurable: Do you have a method for evaluating success?
 - Relevant: Can you apply this information in your current — or a future — role?

- Challenging: Do these objectives encourage you to think critically about your performance?

I am developing a new class to help teachers connect themselves and children to nature. Before I fully develop the class, I plan to take another environmental education class to learn more theory to back up my passion. In developing and facilitating the class, I will gauge my success through self-reflection, student questions and feedback, and final evaluations. I want to ensure that I give my students a strong theoretical background to draw from if they choose to rethink their programming to include stronger connections for children with the natural world around them.

Active Participation in Learning

The reflective process described above will help you to participate in the training event with a deeper commitment to growth and change; you enter with a purpose. Then it is up to you to actively participate and make the most of the opportunity. Gone are the days of taking classes because you have to; when you sat in the back of the room hoping that if you looked down and kept your mouth shut, the teacher would leave you alone. It's time to sit in the front, make eye contact with others, and participate actively. Active participation is a state of learning; it means you are fully present, open-minded, engaged in discussion, involved in activities, and ready to transform yourself.

- **Fully present:** Magda Gerber (2002) introduced us to the idea of being fully present in her writings about infant and toddler care when she described how we should give our full attention to someone else: focusing exclusively on the person you are with and on what she has to share with you. Have you ever had a con-

versation with someone and felt like whenever you spoke the other person was thinking of how to respond instead of focusing on what you were saying? When the message is being delivered, the fully-present learner is thinking only of the message. There will be plenty of opportunities to ask questions or share your ideas later. Write a brief note to yourself if you need to, but then put your focus back on the message again.

- **Open-minded:** Think of a time when you were attending a staff meeting or training and every time a new idea or strategy was presented someone in the room offered the reasons why it would not work in their program: the parents would never agree, the board would not go along with it, the mission does not support it, the staff is not experienced enough. It is easy to convince yourself that although the information sounds great, it would never work for you. In order for new information to change your attitudes and actions, you need to take a "Why not?" approach: Why not try letting the children drive the curriculum? Why not let the children decide when they are hungry for snack? Why not encourage parents to join an advisory board?
- **Engaged in discussion:** According to Brookfield and Preskill (2005), engaging in discussion connects us to the topic, shows respect for other people's points of view, allows us to learn from one another, and allows us to create new meaning for ourselves. Listen carefully and attentively to others, play around with the new information, see how well it fits with what you already know and the assumptions you have made, and share what you think. Too often, people sit quietly through classes and workshops because they are self-conscious about speaking up: They don't want to be seen as the one with dif-

ferent ideas or they don't want to be wrong. However, new ideas are formed when everyone's thoughts are mixed together, like a batch of cookie dough. If someone keeps their thoughts to themselves it's like the chocolate chips being withheld from the dough. The cookies will still taste good, but everyone who tastes them will sense that something important is missing. The chocolate chips are like the missing perspective; the key ingredient toward the creation of something new and exciting that resulted from many separate parts.

- **Involved in Activities:** As you take in new information, you need opportunities to play around with the new ideas in your mind. You need opportunities to develop and test new theories. You need opportunities to apply the new information and figure out how it works. You need to move from abstract theories to real solutions. As adults, we learn much like the children in our care.

I live in an area that was carved out by glaciers years ago. It's full of small hills, ridges, valleys, and lakes left behind by those glaciers. If I want children to understand the power of glaciers, I might read them books that include these concepts and talk to them about it. Then they need opportunities to play around with the new ideas. If I place ice chunks in the sensory table with wet sand, the children will likely push them around and create hills and valleys. If we let those ice chunks melt, the water will likely pool up in the wet sand to form ponds. By playing around with real items, the children can make sense of big, abstract ideas.

When you are invited to engage in activities at a learning event, you need to accept that invitation and participate fully; it is your opportunity to play around with new ideas

and make them more concrete. Tinkering is the catalyst to change (McCarthy, 2005).

- **Ready to Transform:** Remember, your overall goal in attending a learning event is to change both the way you think and the way you act: to transform. Transformation can be a frightening and difficult process. It means letting go of ideas and ways that may not have worked, but were familiar and comfortable. When you create strategies for using new information in ways that are positive and personally meaningful, the process will begin to feel more natural.

Creating an Action Plan

Creating an action plan is one way of using new information in a positive and personally meaningful way. To create an action plan, you need to personalize the new information, make realistic commitments, document your plan, be accountable, assess your progress, and celebrate your success. Since conferences provide participants with so many ideas in a short period of time, I often ask people to create action plans before leaving my workshops.

- **Personalize:** When you consider everything you've learned, write down the one or two ideas that are the most meaningful to you: the ideas that connect back to what you wanted to learn in the first place. Toward the end of a workshop, participants should take a few moments to reflect upon what they learned that will make a difference in the way they teach young children: changes in their ways of thinking (I now believe . . .).
- **Make realistic commitments:** You can't change everything all at once. Consider the ideas you just wrote down and set goals: goals that will allow you and

others to see real change. Based on those changes in thinking, it's important to set goals that translate new thoughts into actions (Because I now believe . . . I will begin to . . .).

- **Document your plan:** It is one thing to set goals; it is quite another to make them visible. In writing down your goals, you enter into a contract with yourself. This contract should include only a few goals, the steps you will need to take to achieve them, and self-imposed deadlines. (In order to achieve . . . I need to do . . . and . . . and . . . and I will accomplish this all by . . .).
- **Build in accountability:** When you develop an action plan, you hold yourself accountable to your goals. Consider creating two identical action plans, and swapping one copy with someone at the event along with contact information. The two of you can become Accountability Partners, agreeing to contact each other after six months to discuss your progress toward your goals and celebrate your successes. You could also choose to give a copy of your action plan to a colleague or a trusted friend, someone you can count on to hold you accountable to the commitments you made to yourself.
- **Assess your progress:** It's very easy to allow everyday life and all the responsibilities that go with it to derail you from your plans. After all, your goals may not seem as important as the teacher who just resigned without notice or the parent whose child was bitten — again. Change can take a back seat to pressing issues. Set a date every month to do a progress check. Make adjustments to action steps and deadlines as needed, but try not to push them back too far. Be gentle but firm with yourself.

- **Celebrate your success:** Take time to celebrate the completion of each step in your action plan; each action step takes you closer to success and change. Develop rituals for celebration. Celebrate alone or with others. Enjoy the journey!

Conclusion

Teaching young children takes a great deal of dedication and commitment. You spend every day helping young children to grow and change. It's important to be as committed to your own growth as you are to the children's. By setting goals related to your own personal growth, being an active participant in learning events, and creating an action plan, you can take responsibility for your own learning and ensure that learning leads to change.



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